

The Second Coming by TheDevotchka

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Summary: In 1983, the so-called 'Loser's Club' defeated It, a monster who had plagued the town of Derry for millennia. In 1984, the new Librarian of the Hawkins Public Library makes a series of phone-calls after the suspicious and unpleasantly familiar disappearances of three children. Seasoned monster hunters, the Loser's Club teams up with another group of unlikely heroes- Mike, Dustin, L

1. Mike Hanlon Makes a Call

In the six months since Mike Hanlon had packed up his modest home in Derry, Maine, he'd made and benefitted from a lot of positive changes. He was sleeping better for one thing, and the deep-set creases under his dark eyes had faded a little, and his complexion was less sallow, his skin a richer, warmer brown than before. And who wouldn't sleep better, once finally free of the Monster, of Derry, of IT? Who wouldn't sleep a little easier and eat a little more knowing that such a horror show was finally over, credits rolled out, house lights up. Hawkins, Indiana was a lot like Derry, but not in any way that frightened him. It was a quaint town, still holding on to the cheerful charm of the 40s and 50s, despite the teenage greaseballs on motorcycles riding up and down Main Street, whistling at the girls who loitered around the Record Stop after school. Hanlon surveyed the street from the first floor window of his office in the Hawkins Public Library. He surveyed this scene with some reluctance, however. He himself had not rode a motorcycle down Main Street in Derry, whistling at girls or goofing off with his pals. His gang, The Loser's Club, had disbanded in 1958 when they defeated It the first time, and they had never again been whole. Stan Uris had slashed his wrists in the bathtub not twenty minutes after he'd called in '83. He'd read about it in the paper. Eddie Kaspbrak, god love him, had lost an arm to It during the final confrontation down in the sewers, and bled out in a sorta heroic way. But after all that, it had been over, and they'd all agreed it had been worth it. Mike, who had felt tied to Derry since the day he was born, left on the very day they emerged from the sewers. The job in Hawkins hadn't been planned; he'd never even heard of the place, but he was pointed toward the town by a Hawkins native, local teacher by trade, who he'd met on the greyhound out of Bangor. With just short of sixty dollars in his savings account, he figured it was a good idea to take any job offered to him.

The real similarities between Derry and Hawkins began in earnest in early spring of 1984. Mike had, of course, heard about the missing kids in 83, it had happened not long before he'd arrived in town, but one had been found alive and well and the other was a teen who had most likely run away. These were not tragedies to Mike Hanlon, who

had seen the dismembered and disfigured corpses of his own classmates in 1958 and those of other local kids in 1983. To Mike Hanlon, a simple runaway was about as peaceful as it got. But in March 1984, the body of six-year-old Jamie Beckers washed up in the Hawkins quarry, minus his left leg and part of his right arm. There were bite marks around the ragged edges where his limbs had been pulled off. From the pictures he'd bribed out of a deputy at the Sheriff's department (up to your old tricks Mike is it starting again is it how) the boy's face had a stiff, glazed look that was more than familiar. Despite the missing limbs, Mike Hanlon was fairly sure the boy had died of fright.

"It can't be," he'd muttered lightly under his breath, sure his face was betraying the dawning dread he felt.

"Shouldn't be, small town like this, but there it is." The deputy caught a look at his face and shuffled his feet a little. "Say, Mr Hanlon, what do you want to look at those pictures for anyway? Aren't you a library man?" Mike had been prepared for this. Chief Rademacher back in Derry had regarded him first with suspicion and then with hostility when he'd started asking questions in '83, and the 'concerned citizen' bit would only get you so far.

"I've always had an interest in the macabre," Hanlon offered a grimace. "My friend, a good friend of mine is a horror writer, and I like to give him ideas when I can. His name is Bill Denbrough, if you've heard of him." The deputy reached a hand up to scratch his head, looking off to the side, but Mike had seen a brightness in his eyes. Bingo.

"That wouldn't be the fella who wrote 'The Black Rapids', would it? My wife liked that book a lot."

"The very same. Say, I think I'll ask him to come visit me here in Hawkins soon, stay a week or so. I'm sure he'd love to meet your wife, sign a few copies in person, what do you say?" The deputy was turning an unsavory shade of purple.

"Oh, ayuh, I think she'd like that a whole lot. You're a good guy, Mr. Hanlon." Mike felt the blood drain from his face and an unpleasant sensation like pins and needles prick up behind the skin on his cheeks

at the use of that expression so often used in Derry. Ayuh. He hadn't heard it anywhere in Indiana before.

"It's no problem," he said, sounding smoother than he felt. "Any friend of mine is a friend of Bill's."

"A friend, yeah. We're friends. So I guess I don't mind you looking at those pictures, or passing the idea along to the writer. You'll tell him where you got the pictures for when he writes his book though, won't you? I think my wife would get a kick out of seeing my name in the credit line."

"Oh sure, sure I will." He wouldn't pass the name or the idea along, and any invite he did send Bill would be a summons back into the Hell they'd all been so certain had closed forever. He would not call Bill, or any of them, until and unless it became necessary. As before, he had to be 100 percent sure.

Only two days after the body of the Beckers kid washed up, Jenny and Jackie Kane, two beautiful twin girls of fourteen, were found mutilated in the stretch of woods out by the junkyard. They had been missing less than 24 hours, and had probably been killed on their way home from school. Their mother had not even reported their disappearance to the police because she'd gone to bed early the night before after taking some sleeping pills and had assumed they'd gone right to school in the morning without waking her. The bodies had been found by a couple of joggers around eight AM. The paper suggested animal attacks, but Mike knew better and wished he didn't. What he wouldn't give for a pack of feral wolves or a rabid bear. What he wouldn't give for a little normalcy. But there was none to be had, and with three dead in a matter of a few days, Mike Hanlon made a call.

"Hello, you've reached the office of Benjamin Hanscom. How can I direct your call?" The bubbly voice of Ben's receptionist lilted into the phone. It sounded alien against the bleak backdrop that had settled around Mike since he'd decided to make the call.

"I need to speak with Mr Hanscom on a private matter of some urgency."

"Who may I say is calling?"

"This is Mike Hanlon. He'll know the name."

"Alright sir, I'll see if Mr Hanscom is available. Hold please." Mike waited for the call-holding music, but the line clicked and Ben's voice came out of the speaker before it had a chance to start.

"Mike? Sheila said it was Mike Hanlon calling, is this Mike?"

"Yeah. Hi Ben. How's Bev?" Calling Ben Hanscom first was essentially killing two birds with one stone. After the final confrontation in Derry, Ben Hanscom had finally gathered the courage to ask Beverly Marsh on a date. After a painful pre-adolescent summer of longing and several decades of complicated relationships with red-heads who were not Beverly, all it had taken was a bloody showdown with a monster as old as time.

"She's good. We both are. Mike, it's not like I'm not glad to hear from you, but-"

"I know. Believe me, Ben, I wouldn't be making this call if I didn't have to. You know how I hate to be the bearer of bad news."

"Yeah. And yet you always seem to be left with that job." Ben sounded weary, but not frightened. Probably he thought something unfortunate had happened, maybe that Bill had a stroke or Richie's trashmouth had gotten him knifed over a botched mugging.

"I... there isn't an easy way to say this, because we didn't swear again and I know you won't want to hear it, but..."

"But what? Why are you bothering me?" There was a pitchy, panicked note to Ben's voice now. Perhaps he'd started to sense something... the fear.

"I think It's back. I don't think... I don't think we killed it for good." There was a long silence on the other end of the phone, and Mike would have thought he'd hung up if it wasn't for the low sound of Ben's breathing.

"You're in Derry?" He asked eventually, quietly.

"No. I'm in Indiana, in a town called-"

"Indiana? For Chrissake, Mike, what do you think you're playing at? It is dead, and It is dead in Derry. Indiana, jeeee-sus!"

"I know how it sounds! Maybe It's back and maybe it's something else, but there are three children dead here in the less than a week. Limbs missing, torn clean off, bitemarks that look almost human... but mostly it's their faces, Ben. The little kids faces. It's like they died of pure fright. Looking at them is so much like looking at Huggins and Criss in the tunnels. I... do you believe me?" Mike hadn't realised it before, but he was desperate for Ben to believe him and to come.

"Believe you?" Ben replied softly. His voice had changed, had taken on a soft, hollow edge. "After everything we've been through together, I believe you. Mike I wish I didn't. I wish you hadn't called, even if that meant I never heard from you every again in my whole goddamn life. Do you believe me?"

"Yes." It stung a little but Mike didn't allow it to hurt too much. He didn't blame Ben for that. And he couldn't feel too hurt, because he knew, by the sheer honesty in Ben's words and tone, that he would come. And if he would come, Bev would, and probably Bill too. Probably Richie, too.

"I'll come. I'll ask Bev, too, but I won't ask her to come, you understand me? This is not the same as before, I know that, because It is dead and we made sure It was, and we lost Eddie when we killed it, but I'll come because you're asking me to, and I'll help if I can. But I won't ask Bev to come, Mike."

"I appreciate that. I called you, not her. And I'll call Bill and Richie, but I'll leave you to talk to Bev however you want to, Ben."

"Alright." Ben sighed. "So you called me first. Last time you called Stan first, and he killed himself. I'm not going to do that, but it's as sure as shit bad omen that you called me first."

"I shoulda called Bill first."

"On that we can agree. Call him second. Where did you say you

were?"

"I didn't. It's Hawkins, Indiana. I'm at the Hawkins Public Library."

"Jee-sus." Ben whistled low through his teeth. "Feels a lot like trying to see to the future through a funhouse mirror."

"Being a Librarian is what I'm good at, I make no apology."

"I know. I'll leave tonight, I need to explain to Bev and she's at work for now."

"That's alright. Look me up when you get here, or just come by the library. I'll wait for you."

"Alright. Bye, Mike. I... I guess I'll see you soon."

"I guess you will. Bye Ben." The line clicked off and Mike felt a feeling of loss wash over him. He had known Ben in one form or another for the whole of his meaningful life, and had trusted him implicitly, but as the call ended he had felt sure that Ben had just lied to him. About coming probably not, but about telling Bev? Maybe. Because Bev would come, Mike knew that and Ben probably knew it too. And coming here would be dangerous.

2. The Loser's Club Gets a Rebrand

"Sure, I'll come." Stuttering Bill Denbrough, who had not stuttered over a single word since leaving Derry for the final time, had not needed to think about whether he would go to Hawkins, Indiana. Things had been good for him the past six months or so. He'd written a new novel, and the manuscript was currently sitting on his agent's desk with a golden star sticker on as a HIGH PRIORITY JOB, a job well done. It would be published in the summer, and Bill had been assured it would be a best seller. Things with Audra had never been so good, he'd never so much as dared believe she could love him so completely, knowing everything, but she did and he was grateful.

It had been rocky at the start and Audra had been badly hurt, but the more miles Bill put between them and Derry, the better she'd been. She didn't blame him for anything, and greater still, she thought he was a hero of sorts. She didn't think he'd gotten his brother Georgie killed in '52 and she didn't think he'd gotten Eddie killed in '83. She'd whole-heartedly forgiven him for his brief affair with Beverly Marsh, accepting his honest apology and admission that he had believed it was his last night on earth and that he'd wanted to spend it feeling loved. Childhood love was not the same sort of intense, deep-set love, not like the love he had for Audra, but it was pure and good and had gotten him through that night. Sometimes he thought maybe he caught her watching him when he talked to women at parties, but that could have been his imagination, but (guilty, your guilty conscience Bill, because you love Beverly, you love her more and she knows it she can see) for the most part things were better than he had any right to expect.

"Who was that on the phone?" Audra rounded the corner into their open plan kitchen, wearing one of his smart shirts and nothing else. Bill wanted to reach for her, draw her close and maybe take her over the counter, but he didn't.

"Mike Hanlon." He tried to keep his voice level and pleasant, but she jerked her head up as though slapped by an invisible hand.

"Mike Hanlon? From... from before?"

"Ayuh." Good Jesus, there it was, he hadn't said that in years, not since he was a child, and he wasn't even going back to Derry and yet Mike had said it had started again and that was impossible but it felt the same.

"What did he want?" Her voice was thin and reedy but her gaze was intense. She was willing him to say there had been a death or a birthday invite or maybe Bev and Ben were getting married or *anything* she would take *anything* or even no news is good news, but-

"He's moved to an town in Indiana. Three kids have been killed in the last week and it looks like-"

"No, don't you dare say it Bill don't you *dare!*" Audra wailed, fisting her auburn hair in shaking hands and pulling. The sudden pain helped to focus her mind a little, which was goo, because she knew the next words out of Bill's mouth might well send her right over the edge into loonsville.

"I have to go, Audra. I don't think it's the same thing as before, not It, we killed It and I know that, but it's something. If Mike's asking us to come, then it's something, and I have to go."

"The others, too?" She asked, miserable. He'd made up his mind on the phone already, and Audra had no desire to go a few rounds with him. She'd tried that before and he'd left anyway.

"He's called Ben, and they'll come. I think Richie will, too."

"Not Eddie though, Eddie or Stan. They won't come. Can't because they're dead." She said it coldly, and took some satisfaction in the way Bill winced.

"It's as much for them as for Mike. If this is the same sort of thing, I didn't think there could be more than one It but maybe there can and it's killing kids, Audra. Little kids, like Georgie." The mention of Bill's dead kid-brother closed all avenues of protest for Audra. It was a weak move and they both knew it, but Bill had won by default.

"Fine. You go on, get yourself hurt or maybe killed doing a job that isn't yours. Don't expect me to follow you this time."

"You don't know what a relief that is," Audra opened her mouth to yell, but the look on his face killed the words in her throat. His skin was ashy and sallow-looking, mouth set in a wavering, grim line angling towards a frown. "It was quite literally my worst nightmare, seeing you down in those tunnels. Having you in Derry. I would give my life to stop you going to Indiana."

"You might be giving your life anyway," she retorted quietly. Bill let that hang in the air for a moment, then approached his wife with cautious little steps.

"If I didn't go. If I abandoned my friends when they needed me, maybe letting more little kids die, would you truly be happy with that?"

"No. You wouldn't be you if you did that, and I can't be so selfish." The words hurt to say because they were true.

"You'll stay here, won't you?"

"I will," she mumbled against his shoulder, allowing him to pull her gently against him. She felt warm and safe in his arms, and made a mental note of how his boy curved against hers, because she felt she might never feel him hold her again.

"Call for you, Rich." Richie Tozier had been enjoying a midday scotch and cigarette break between segments when his manager held up a phone in the sound room. He rolled his eyes, but took the call.

"Richie Tozier, at your service. Or Kinky Briefcase, or Buford Kissdrivel, or-

"Richie, it's me, it's Mike Hanlon."

"Ma-ike Hanlon as I live n'breathe." Richie's voice naturally sloped into the pickaninny voice from his childhood, a voice he hadn't done in earnest since he was eleven and at all since leaving Derry.

"Beep beep, Richie." It really was Mike Hanlon.

"What's going on, Mikey? I'm guessing this isn't so much a courtesy call."

"Not so much. There's no easy way to say it, but this is my third call today and I'm too tired to bring you into it gently. It's back, It's not dead, and I need your help." Richie had been expecting the words, and maybe even hoping for them. The cold certainty that settled around him was like a safety blanket he didn't know he'd been missing.

"Home, to Derry?" He asked softly.

"No. I'm in Indiana, in a town called Hawkins, it's-"

"Not Derry? My friend, you must be mistaken. It doesn't move, it is Derry for Chrissake, It isn't in Indiana."

"Look I know more about this thing than anyone else, I watched and studied it for my whole damn life while you all forgot. I know the signs, don't you wish I didn't? Don't you think I'd rather be doing anything else than calling you all here? There are three children dead here, limbs torn off, human-like bite marks, and faces like they've seen the worst thing in the universe and straight-up died of fear. You hearing me?"

"I hear you. I'll come, you know I will. Not because we promised and not because I think you're right, not yet. But because you asked, and you wouldn't lie."

"Friends don't lie," Mike replied, and wondered why the words sent a foreign chill down his spine, like someone else had said them from inside his brain.

Mike had intended to close the Library a little early to give himself time to gather what he'd need to convince the others. He needed to stop by the sheriffs department and find his deputy friend, and he needed to go home and get his newspaper clippings. He hadn't had much time to look into the history of Hawkins, but that was alright. He didn't think there was much to find, it wasn't a hidden cesspool like Derry. Up until the Byers boy had disappeared last November the town had been as squeaky clean as small-town America could get. The terrible feeling that somehow It had followed him here wouldn't stop picking at his brain, even though he had moved here *after* November. It still felt... related. Mike Hanlon had intended to close

the Library a little early, but there was a group of kids huddled around the little occult shelf and they would not leave.

"Can I help you boys with something?" Four guilty faces spun to meet his, and he noticed with some surprise that the smallest of the boys was Will Byers.

"No, sir, no thank you." A boy with a mop of unruly curls and too-few teeth flashed him a grin.

"That's an interesting subject matter. Maybe not such good reading for boys like yourself. I might suggest the funnybooks in the young adult section."

"We'll look there too, thanks. We, uh, we were looking for stuff about vampires and werewolves and stuff, you know like horror books." This kid stepped a little forward from the others, sounded more sure of himself, and looked Mike in the eye. He reminded Mike of Stuttering Bill as he had been in 1958, the unspoken leader of the Losers Club.

"I think I'd be getting some complaints from your parents if I let take that stuff home, but I think I can show you a few things here, for a moment." Mike reached up past the occult shelf and pulled a few horror comics from the shelf. "These are for grown-ups really, they're comics but they're from adult horror books. Lotta gruesome pictures. Go on over to the desks and have a look." Mike handed the novel to the leader of the group and watched them slink off to a nearby table.

The door at the front of the Library opened with a little puff of warm spring air, and Mike Hanlon looked up. Beverly Marsh looked as good now as she had a year ago, maybe better. She had put on a little weight, and it suited her. The smile she was wearing looked comfortable and easy and that suited her too. Ben Hanscom suited her.

"Beverly! I didn't think you were coming!"

"Wild horses couldn't keep me away." After a pause, she added, "Neither could Ben, though he sure did try. It's good to see you, Mike."

"Glad to see you, wish you weren't here." She nodded in reply, then stepped forward to embrace him.

"Ben's just parking up. It was odd, walking up here, I had the strangest feeling, this library... it doesn't look like Derry Public, and yet..."

"I know. The towns have their similarities, don't they?"

"I like this Library a whole lot more, even without the glass corridor," Ben Hanscom had appeared in the doorway behind them, accompanied by Richie Tozier, who looked... tired, and peaky. No one looked all that frightened, it wasn't like last time. *That's because they don't believe you, Mikey, they're just humouring you because you're alone and you're poor and you really got the SHORT STRAW in this game*, Mike brushed these thoughts from his mind and stepped forward to shake first Ben's hand, then Richie's.

"Thank you for coming, both of you. Really. I have... I have a lot to show you, and I think after I do you'll want to stay."

"I hope you're wrong about that," Richie said with a smile.

"Would that I were. Either of you see Bill on your travels into town?"

"Nope. Bev and I flew into Indianapolis a few hours ago, and took a car from there."

"Ditto," Richie nodded.

"I don't know where in the world he's living at the moment, so I guess it could take a little while. Would you all like to sit in my office whilst I try to call him? Audra might know where he is."

"If you don't mind I'd like to look around. I don't get into Libraries much." Of course that was Ben.

"Sure thing. Mind out for those kids reading horror comics, though." Ben looked around the empty library and pointed to the block of desks. The horror comic, Salem's Lot, by Stephen King, had been left on the desk, open to a particularly gory scene.

"Huh. They could have at least put the book back. Oh well. Bev, Richie, you want a drink? I got some beers in the fridge."

"Sounds wonderful," Bev licked her bottom lip subconsciously.

"C'mon up." The three left Ben Hanscom to roam the shelves and went upstairs to wait for Bill.

They did not have to wait long. Bill arrived just as the sun was setting, still less than 24 hours since the telephone call.

"Bill my buddy!" Richie called from the first floor door of Mike's office. "Where in the name of our lord and saviour have you been?"

"California, same as you, trashmouth. Couldn't get a car from the airport, last one went to some faaam-OUS radio DJ, had to wait for a bus."

"The early bird catches the worm," Richie replied pleasantly.

"Everybody else here?" Bill asked, looking around as Ben emerged from the stacks where he'd been reading the back covers of some new travel books. Mike and Bev appeared behind Richie at the top of the stairs, and a look passed between Bev and Bill that was unreadable and made Ben flush with something like jealousy.

"Glad you're here, Bill. Could you shut that door behind you and bolt it?"

"Sure thing, Mike." Bill did as bid and then joined the group, who had congregated around the tables in the reading area.

"Give us the low-down, Mikey boy," Richie said solemnly, and Mike, though feeling a touch of irritation, grinned.

"We all know the pattern, and some of it's the same and some of it's not. We also know that the pattern can be changed by intervention, as we stopped the killings early in 1958 and stopped them, perhaps permanently in 1983. I know it has not been 27 years. I know that, so don't any of you say it. The rest of the pattern feels too much like truth to me, and I made a mistake last time, waiting for nine children to be killed before contacting you all. Three have died so far, and I

won't allow there to be a fourth if I have something to do about it."

"I understand what you're saying, Mike. But It's dead. In 58 we knew it might not be, that's why we made the promise to come back if it started again. But It's dead now, it *has* to be."

Across the Library, wedged firmly and uncomfortably behind the occult shelves, were four boys holding their breaths with wide eyes and pale, shocked faces.

"I know that voice," Mike Wheeler, unofficial leader of the group, whispered. He slowly raised his head and peered through the gap between the tops of the books and the shelves. "It's him! It's Bill Denbrough, the guy who wrote that horror book I stole off my dad! Black Rapids!" The exclamation was a whisper, but the excitement was clear.

"How'd you know, Mike?" Dustin lisped.

"Saw him on Letterman talking about some film he did with his wife, she's that actress with the really red hair," Mike explained.

"Is that her?" Will was now looking through the gap, and he nodded toward Bev.

"I can't see, but I don't think so. Sounds different." They all accepted this immediately, because it was Mike who had said it and he knew these things.

"Is anyone else actually listening to what they're talking about?" Lucas cut in, a scathing look on his face. The others shut up and listened harder.

"The Demogorgon?" Dustin's eyes widened. "They're talking about the Demogorgon?"

"Or something like it. They're talking about those kids that have died."

"Do you think they know about the Upside Down? What do you think, Mike?" Mike had become very still and very pale as he listened to these strange adults talk about killing a monster. Nine people.

Their monster had killed nine people, and they thought, at least the Librarian did, that it was the same monster who had come to Hawkins. If these adults knew about it, knew how to kill it... maybe they *did* know something about the Upside Down. Maybe they knew something about Eleven. Without really thinking it through, Mike Wheeler stepped out from behind the stacks in a move that took more unthinking courage than standing up to Troy or even the Demogorgon. Mike Wheeler stepped out from behind the stacks and put his faith in a group of grownups.

3. Mike Wheeler Meets The Writer

Like the unthinking decision to step out and reveal himself to the group, his rapid labelling of the adults had been an unconscious one. The Lady had jumped pretty hard when he appeared, and her chair thumping back down on the wooden boards was the only sound for an agonising few seconds. The Librarian shot up with an expression that was less surprise and more anger; it didn't suit his face, and Mike had trouble connecting this man to the kindly guy who'd offered them the horror comic just a few hours before.

"What do you think you're doing, son? The Library is closed, but I think you know that." His voice was calm, but that was somehow worse than shouting. When adults got all calm about a kid who'd done something bad, it was a whole other kind of anger.

"I do believe, I do BUH-LIEVE this yankee-doodle's been snoopin'." That was the loudmouth, or the trashmouth, he'd been called. Mike thought the nickname fit.

"C'mon now, out you go. Are your friends here, too? Hiding somewhere?" The Librarian had come around the front of the desk and Mike was sure he was going to charge at him, but he didn't. He headed for the deadbolt on the door, probably meaning to throw them out. Mike was about ready to hurl his guts.

"Wait, Mike." Mike felt a jolt go through him at the gentle, pensive voice of The Writer. He was the only person at the table who had seemingly no reaction to Mike's sudden appearance, and now he'd addressed him by name. Psychic, he thought. *Like Eleven, maybe* the secret voice inside him suggested. Mike felt his heart speed up and a fine layer of perspiration coat his palms.

"How'd you-"

"Bill, I don't know what crazy thought you're starting to think but I suggest you *un*think it right now," The Librarian was looking at Bill and Bill rolled his head slightly to look at him.

"It's okay, Mike. I think... if it's the same as before, like you say, then

we're being led. This is part of it." The Librarian huffed, but didn't say anything more and didn't slide open the deadbolt on the door, either. The Writer turned back to Mike who was still standing dumb and bewildered just to the side of the stacks. He could hear the very light, whispering squabbles of his friends. Dustin would want to back him up, Lucas would want to hang back. Will would want to listen a little more, and that was alright.

"What's your name?" The Writer was certainly addressing him now, and Mike realized the Librarian was probably called Mike, too. Not psychic then. *Not like Eleven, you stupid baby son of a-*

"Mike Wheeler. Uh, sir."

"Mike Wheeler. Hi. I'm Bill. This is Ben. And Beverly, and you may already be acquainted with your Librarian, Mike. Hanlon. And this great asshole to my right is Richie. He does a lot of voices, but he's no good."

"I thought they were pretty good," Mike felt his face flush.

"Dee boy knows dee talent when he see it."

"Shut up, Richie." The Librarian had come around the front of the desks and was looking toward the stacks to Mike's left. "The rest of your gang back there, are they?"

"I-uh," Mike did not want to tell on them, but how could he cover for them with The Librarian only a few steps away. They hadn't been hiding in a very good place.

"Yes, sir." Dustin's lispy voice popped out from behind the stacks, and a half a second later so did the boy himself. A dark brown hand dropped quickly away from his arm, where Lucas had obviously been trying to pin him to the floor.

"Alright then. Cards on the table, we've told you our names, Mike Wheeler, and that is with the assumption your friends heard them too. It's only right for us to know all of yours too, don't you think?" The Librarian was being reasonable, and the calm but deadly edge had gone out of his voice. Probably because The Writer had said it

was okay.

"Dustin, sir." Dustin had stepped out from behind the stacks, quite obviously stepping *over* Lucas in the process. Will stood next.

"Will Byers. Sir."

"Will Byers. You factor into our conversation a little, I recall." Will only nodded, not willing to say *anything* about the Monster until they'd discussed it properly.

"Down there is Lucas. He's being a real baby." Dustin pointed to the stacks, and Lucas made a huffing sound and stood up.

"Wouldn't have to if Mike could have just kept his ass on the ground like we planned."

"Why'd you plan to spy?" The Lady didn't sound mad, just curious. She was studying each of the boys in turn, and Mike felt his cheeks flush again under her stare. She was pretty, for an older lady.

"We, uh I don't know." Dustin looked toward Mike. They all did. It had been his idea, after all.

"I don't know, lady. We just did, okay? We saw you and the other guys come in and it looked like something big so we just... got down there to wait for a while. We weren't spying." He crossed his arms over his chest defensively.

"You were. But that's alright." The Writer. "I think we all need to get a few more of our cards on the table. I think a lot of this can be cleared up just by playing with a full deck. Are we agreed?" He was addressing his group, who all nodded. Mike felt the ridiculous urge to pose the question to his friends, too, like they were some organized team of grown-ups sitting round a table. He nodded for himself, and was pleased to see the others were, too. Even Lucas.

"Only because you're the Librarian and I like coming in here," Lucas put in. He sounded grumpy, but they could deal with that later.

"No, if you don't want to be here, any of you, you can go. No questions asked. All we'd suggest is that you don't share anything you

may have *overheard* in here with anyone else. Okay? Agreed?"

"Agreed." Mike did speak for them all then. He thought Lucas might go for the door but he didn't. It was beginning to look like Mike's impulse to make contact with these adults may have been the right decision. And after what had happened, any extra information or help they could get would be welcome.

"Right then. Why don't you all come and sit down with us." It wasn't phrased as a question, and the boys seated themselves along the desk running parallel to the adults.

"Have you heard of the Upside Down?" Mike hadn't meant to lay down quite so many of his cards at once, but it was, after all, the deep-down burning question. Said question was met with frowns and confusion.

"They have no idea what you're talking about!" Dustin whined. He scooted his chair back, presumably to leave, when The Writer put a hand on the desk in front of him. Dustin stopped moving.

"We've not heard that term before, but it could be a different word for the same thing. We call our monster It, but it had other names. Many, many other names. And other hiding places too, although we found it most often in the sewers of Derry. We are coming at what may be the same problem from two very different angles, and I think we need to be a little patient with each other." Mike saw the sense in this. They'd named the Upside Down themselves and it probably wasn't what any adult would call it.

"The Upside Down is like, another dimension." Mike began. He heard rustling behind him and Dustin pulled out a sketch of the flea and the acrobat. The adults leaned in close to look at it, but none of them laughed, and that was good. Mike jabbed a finger at the stick man on the paper. "So the acrobat can move back and forwards on this tightrope, okay?" He glanced at them all to make sure they were listening and more importantly that they weren't laughing yet.

"Okay, sure. The acrobat and the flea, I've seen this before." The Writer scanned the picture and pointed towards the dot. "The flea can go back and forth and side to side, because it's smaller. That's the

second dimension. Right?" Mike flushed with pleasure at the unsure, questioning tone in The Writer's voice. He was looking to him as the authority on the matter. Mike soldiered on, knowing Dustin would correct him if he got anything wrong.

"Right. But the other dimension, the one the flea can get to, it's like, really small. So the acrobat can't get to it and doesn't even know it's there, unless something rips open a passageway into the first and then I guess the acrobat might be able to see it or move into it. You dig?"

"We dig." A corner of The Writer's mouth quirked up.

"I get it all, Dustin?"

"That's about it. The second dimension is the Upside Down."

"Is it different to this one? I mean, did you know it was different?" The Lady asked.

"It was different." Will spoke quietly, and his eyes were firmly on the worn surface of the desk in front of him.

"Different how?" Trashmouth hadn't picked up on the tone of his voice, or he wouldn't have asked. Mike could see it in their faces, a sudden reluctance to look at Will, like maybe they knew what he had to say would be real bad.

"It looked kinda the same, but like something had happened, an accident or a nuclear war or something. The buildings on Main were the same, but all the windows were dark, and there weren't any other people. Uh, I mean, alive ones."

"Oh God," The Lady moaned, pushing her knuckles against her mouth until they were bleached white with pressure. She *believed him*.

"And the air was wrong. I could breathe it, but it made me sick. Probably if I'd been stuck in there much longer it would have killed me." Will said this matter-of-factly but Mike heard the quaver in his voice and knew he was still very much haunted.

"How long were you in there for?"

"About a week, but time passed... differently, I think. Or at least it felt that way."

"A week," The Quiet One mused. It was the first time he'd spoken, and Mike couldn't remember his name. Couldn't remember any of their names but Bill in truth, but he'd been under a lot of pressure during the introductions part. He'd ask Lucas later, Lucas was wild about remembering things, especially names and whether Mike owed him a quarter or not.

"But you're alright now?" The lady had pried her hand from her mouth but her knuckles had left red indents around her lips that were somehow gruesome. She reached a pale hand out towards Will and then stopped and withdrew it. *Probably not a mother*, Mike thought.

"Oh sure. I think I get sick a little more now."

"Boys always got a cold," Dustin added unhelpfully.

"But the important thing is, he's safe now. He's safe, but someone else is still trapped in there somewhere. And she..." Mike had to swallow around a lump that had mysteriously began to form in his throat. "She is not safe at all."

"Mike..." Lucas's voice was tentative, and the hand he placed on Mike's shoulder was soft and light, but Mike shrugged him off.

"She's still in there. Her name is Eleven and she's my friend and she's still in there with the monster. Can you help us?" He was pretty sure he was gonna cry or puke if no one said anything in about a second, but he kept his gaze level and met each of their eyes.

"We'll help if we can, Mike. But I think we need to hear the rest."

4. Nancy Wheeler Takes a Walk

It had always closed before. Nancy found herself in this stretch of forgotten forest more and more often in the months since Barb had died. At first it hadn't been a conscious decision at all, she'd been driving around with Jonathan, stopping occasionally to take pictures of anything he found particularly bleak or interesting. He really was a lovely photographer, and he had a good eye, so she'd let him do most of the calling out stopping points. But she'd seen a flash of something in the forest and slammed her hand on the dashboard without thinking about it at all. Jonathan had squeezed the breaks and pulled to the side, but Nancy was out of the car and pelting towards the thick row of trees before the engine cut out. He'd chased her as she knew he would, and she knew in a vague, frightened part of her mind that this was something akin to climbing into the jaws of a lion for no apparent reason, but she ran onward anyway, her feet flying over strewn logs and half hidden roots that should have turned her ankle every three or four steps.

"Nancy! Wait up, Nancy, Nancy!" There was panic in Jonathan's voice, and maybe anger, too. But she'd seen something. Something that felt like a memory... that was when she'd seen the rotted, bloated base of a tree just off the path. It was surrounded by a thick growth of something scummy and putrid looking, and there was a faint trail of delicate-looking tendrils leaking from the jagged gash in its front. She'd seen something like this before, and knew it was an entry-point for the monster. Had she seen the monster, that flash of something pale and alien but so familiar, through the trees?

No.

That monster was dead. Mike had said so, and he had been so sure. He said Eleven had saved them all and killed it, and there had to be truth in that, too. The girl had been powerful and strange in ways Nancy didn't understand, but she was gone now and her little brother's grief and pain had been a tangible presence ever since. And Jonathan's little brother had come back, along with the Sherriff and Joyce Byers, and that meant something too, didn't it? Barb hadn't come back, and that loss, that guilt had probably driven Nancy into

the forest that day with Jonathan in pursuit and on many days since, alone. She was not precisely sure whether she was conducting any kind of study of these bloated, diseased passages, but she did have a vague map in her mind of where each was, and she was fairly confident that she knew when they opened and when they closed again.

There were rules to them; never more than three open at once, and the three that were open were not all the same. Nancy had unofficially named them 'In' 'Out' and 'Shadow'. She was sure In and Out went to the same place, the Upside Down like Mike called it, but Shadow was a smoky question-mark. She'd not dared to go in to any of them, she wasn't *suicidal*, but she had crouched before a Shadow hole and flattened herself to the damp earth with her cheek against the ground, and looked. It had been grey and thick in there, the air, if you could call it that, was cloying and toxic to look at. And had there been a light, somewhere deep inside that pulsed in a garish orange beat like a diseased heart? Nancy couldn't be sure, because looking into that hole was like looking into madness, and it had been all she could do to roll limply onto her back and stare at the sky, the real and present sky, until the urge to scream had subsided and the persistent, tugging pull of her sanity trying to tear free from her brain had subsided.

On that morning as she crossed the deserted forest in the milky light of a rising sun hidden by intense cloud cover, she'd stumbled, quite literally, against an upturned root in front of a hole that should not have been there. They had always closed before. Always opened in threes and closed in threes, over a span of three days. This was a rule and rules (all living things must abide all living things) were not broken. Nancy was afraid, but mostly she was outraged at this injustice.

She didn't know, couldn't have known, that across town her little brother and his friends were rolling their bikes slowly home, none of them talking, their faces blank and vacant and something uncomfortable in their eyes. They had spent the night in the Hawkins Library, learning from and teaching a small group of haunted strangers who had come to slay a monster. Nancy couldn't have known this, and so she didn't connect this strange new hole with the

arrival of the strangers. She *did* know, however, that three children had died in the past week, in gruesome and inhuman ways, and she was bright enough to put these things together.

She'd suspected the monster wasn't dead, anyway. She'd known for certain it wasn't when she'd started finding the holes in the trees, but she'd suspected before. It was a feeling, like the beginnings of a panic attack, and they'd started low in her belly on the night of the showdown with the monster, when it had disappeared (escaped you had it trapped and you let it go) and the feeling was supposed to go away when it was dead, when Mike had told them what happened. It certainly *sounded* dead. Incinerated, even. But the feeling hadn't gone away, and looking into this new hole, that looked ragged and violent, as though it had been forced open rather than expanded into being in an unnaturally natural way, she was sure it wasn't dead. And that it had *made* this hole rather than just using an open one. Maybe that was the difference? The silky grey tendrils of stuff were leaking more heavily from this hole than any other previously. A little of it slipped towards the ground and almost touched her sneakered foot, she drew it back and accidentally kneed herself in the chest, but hardly noticed the breathless pain in her fright. She shuffled back on the forest floor a few crawling paces before finally gathering enough courage to turn her back on it and run. She'd get Jonathan, he wouldn't mind being woken up this early, probably, and he'd know what to do. If there was a part of Nancy that was hoping the hole would close before she got back to it, or even better that it had been a product of her tired and overworked imagination, that part would have been severely disappointed.

"One more time." Nancy sighed, exasperated, and rolled her eyes at the sleepy, swaying boy in the doorway.

"I've been finding holes in the trees, like the one I went through when we were hunting the monster." She'd meant to speak more slowly this time, but found it impossible. "But this morning I found one that shouldn't be there, it-"

"None of them should be there."

"No, no I *know* that, but this one is *more* wrong than the others. There are patterns to how and where and when they appear, and this one is

out of sync, it's just... it's different, I know what I mean, you'll get it when you see it."

"I'm not going into those woods with you, Nance."

"What?" Nancy felt like the wind had been knocked out of her. She took a step back, searching Jonathan's face for any sign he was joking. "You... you have to?"

"Says who? Why should I. Why should *you*, for that matter. Barb is gone. I'm sorry about that. But we're not. And Will's back. It's not our responsibility anymore."

"Three people are dead, Jonathan."

"I know..." Jonathan scratched the back of his head and sniffed. "And I'm sorry about that, but they weren't my people, you know?"

"They were kids. Little kids." Nancy's voice had dropped to a whisper.

"I know, I'm sorry."

"Little kids like Mike. And like Will."

"It's not the same." Jonathan said sharply, but he wouldn't meet her eyes now. Nancy felt bitter hot tears of anger and disappointment sting and blur her vision.

"It is. It is the same. I'm sorry I came here. I should have asked to see Will instead. He's twice as brave and three times as selfless as you."

Jonathan looked at her for a moment that felt like a very long time. Nancy's clenched fists were shaking, and she hated being scrutinized by his wounded stare.

"Alright then," he said finally. "I'll get him." Without another word, Jonathan turned back into the house and slammed the front door shut on Nancy. *I've hurt him* she thought, and then... *good*. The door opened about a minute later, just as Nancy was getting ready to head back into the woods alone, sure Jonathan had gone back to bed. But then there he was, looking breathless and now wearing a coat and a pair of scuffed sneakers.

"Will's not in his room." He looked panicked, and Nancy took a moment to allow herself to revel in this. It made her feel small and mean, but she didn't care. Jonathan was back in the game because he thought Will was in trouble maybe, and Nancy would remember that. She'd remember what kind of person Jonathan was in that moment.

"Are you sure he was last night? He might be sleeping over at one of the others. Not my house I don't think, I'd have heard them keeping half the street awake with their games and ghost stories in the basement if they had."

"I don't know for sure. I got in late last night, I was..." He coughed and looked away.

"We should check at Dustin and Lucas's." Nancy said.

"I'll drive." With Nancy a few paces behind him, Jonathan allowed his panic to subside. He felt stupidly grateful that she hadn't pressed him on that slip-up comment he'd made. He wasn't yet ready to tell anyone about where he went at night, and he didn't think he'd *ever* be able to tell Nancy. She'd look at him... well probably like she'd looked at him a few minutes ago, only *worse*. Only more. But if things went right, then she would be safe. Everyone would be. If things only went-

"I thought you were like really worried about your brother." Jonathan snapped round to the sound of Nancy's voice. He was standing on the driver side of the car, but he hadn't made a move to put his keys in the door. She was looking at him with a half-smirk on her face and he felt his own heat up in response. She was beautiful. Careless with her affection, and still hopelessly devoted to Steve, but beautiful all the same.

"Sorry," he managed, mashing the key toward the keyhole in the hopes it would look smooth. It didn't and it took three tries to get it in, and he scratched his own paintwork quite badly. If Nancy noticed, she didn't say anything, and Jonathan was more than glad about that. He'd probably have spontaneously combusted if she'd laughed at him.

The drive was silent as they approached Dustin's house. He lived in a pretty cul-de-sac reasonably close to Will's, and the two of them spent

the most time together out of the four boys so it was a logical first step.

"Well go on then." Jonathan glanced at Nancy, who gestured towards the house.

"What?"

"Go on and knock. See if he's there."

"It... it's six AM. I knock now and whether he's there or he's not I'm likely to get shot by Dustin's father." Nancy laughed.

"Alright. Alright, it's early. Go round back and see if Will's bike is on the back porch."

"A better idea." Jonathan hauled himself out of the car and crept around the back of the house. Will's bike was not there, but neither was Dustin's. Jonathan tried to swallow down the fresh wave of panic this brought. They could still check at Lucas's, and Mike's too, because Nancy couldn't tell for sure they weren't there. Maybe they'd all been playing late and fallen asleep. Probably Mike's mom even phoned Joyce and she'd just forgotten to tell him. That was probably it. Probably.

As he approached the car, Nancy gave him a thumbs up, and he was just starting to shake his head when he heard the sputtering clacks like slowed-down machine gun fire. He knew the sound because he'd spent a full hour the previous summer showing the kids how to attach the bicycle playing cards to the spokes of their wheels with clothes pegs. When the bike really picked up speed, the cards would rattle off like artillery fire and make the rider believe they were speeding along on the world's fastest and most powerful motorcycle. He held up a finger to Nancy and scanned the crest of the hill leading down to Dustin's.

And there they came, four boys in a line, with four bikes clattering off a disjointed symphony of playing cards. In the silence of the early morning the sound was hopelessly loud, and Nancy got out the passenger seat.

"Well that's half a mystery solved."

"Half?" Jonathan asked without taking his eyes off the boys. He'd picked Will out of the lineup and was watching his progress intently.

"There they are. The other half is where they've been."

"Right." Jonathan agreed vacantly. Then he thought it over. "Right. Damn right. Where in the hell the kids have been. That's the other half." Abruptly the sounds sputtered out and stopped, and Jonathan raised an eyebrow. The boys had caught sight of them and stopped at the top of the hill. Nancy came up beside Jonathan and crossed her arms.

"What are we going to do with them?"

"Something horrible and creative. But first we should find out where they've been."

"Agreed." Nancy waved to the boys, who had not yet resumed their course. It was an unbalanced stand-off, but Mike had called out to stop and so they had. They wouldn't go again until he said so.

"It's Nancy and Jonathan down there."

"In front of my house. Oh *shit, shit* you guys what if my parents are down there too?" Dustin's voice had taken on a high and, in any other circumstances, hilarious pitch.

"I think there'd be some yelling for proper if they were."

"Jonathan wouldn't have knocked for them. He's just looking for me." Will looked smaller than usual, and his mouth was set in a grim line.

"I should have called him from the Library. After what happened, he's always worrying about me."

"Nancy, too," Mike added, and guilt began to fill him up as well.

"Well we better put ourselves out of our own misery," Lucas said grimly, and began to push his bike again.

"I s'pose." Mike agreed. "Though it's worth pointing out that you have nothing to lose in this." Lucas scoffed at this, but said nothing. There was no one waiting to skin *him* at the bottom of the hill, but there sure would be at home when Jonathan dropped him off and let his parents know. Which he would do, because Jonathan was kind of a dick, although Lucas would never tell Will that. The kid worshipped his older brother.

"Hey look Nance, take a look at that?"

"Jonathan, hey, I'm really so-"

"I hope he's not gunna say he's sorry, cuz that would be a real baby move, wouldn't it Nance?"

"Oh yeah." She grinned, and winked at Mike. "Oh yeah, no need to say sorry. You're all grown men now, that's why you think it's okay to be out all night, right?"

"We-"

"I sure hope he's not gunna make an excuse, cuz that would be a real baby move, wouldn't it Jonathan?"

"Oh yeah. I think about the only thing they can really do now is tell us exactly where they've been all night. And it better be *good*." The boys shifted uncomfortably.

"Well, uh." Mike started forward a little, making a split-second decision; he would tell. "We met some people in the Library."